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## **The Role of Libraries in the Preservation and Accessibility of Indigenous Knowledge in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria**

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### **Introduction**

The Niger Delta people have a rich body of indigenous knowledge developed over many centuries. This body of accumulated knowledge has played a vital role in agriculture, animal and human health, natural resources management, education, and other activities (Camble and Aliyu, 2008). Indigenous people, including farmers, landless labourers, women and artisans, cattle rearers, and tribes, are custodians of indigenous knowledge.

Indigenous Knowledge (IK) can be broadly defined as the knowledge that an indigenous (local) community accumulates over generations of living in a particular environment (United Nations Environment Programme, n.d). This definition encompasses technologies, know-how, skills, practices, and beliefs that enable the community to achieve a stable livelihood. According to Nakata and Langton (2005), IK refers to the knowledge, innovation, and practices of indigenous and local communities around the world, developed from experience over centuries, and adapted to the local culture and environment, transmitted orally from generation to generation. IK is collectively owned and exists as stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, cultural values, norms, beliefs, rituals, local languages, and agricultural practices, including the development of plant species and animal breeds (Nakata and Langton, 2005).

There is a growing appreciation of the value of IK. It has become valuable not only to those who depend on it in their daily lives, but to modern industry and agriculture as well. Warren (1991) notes that IK has made a tremendous contribution to crop production by poor farmers. Okuneye and Ayinde (2004) add that small scale resource farmers have good reasons for sticking with their local knowledge and farming practices, because modern technologies can only be successful and sustainable if IK is taken into consideration.

Many libraries recognize IK as an important source of developmental information. Nakata and Langton (2005) observe that the library and information profession has a lot to learn if they are to meet the information needs of indigenous people and appropriately manage IK. This may require libraries to

move outside their comfort zone. The development of services is also demanding, requiring new disciplines, technologies, and collaborations. Indigenous people continue to be generous in sharing their knowledge with libraries, and so libraries must maintain the momentum (Nakata and Langton, 2005).

## **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the study are:

- To discover the role of indigenous knowledge in Niger Delta;
- To explore the effectiveness of IK management in Niger Delta libraries;
- To identify how libraries manage indigenous knowledge;
- To examine how libraries create access to indigenous knowledge; and
- To investigate the challenges of preservation and accessibility of indigenous knowledge.

## **Literature Review**

### **Preservation of Indigenous Knowledge in the Library**

It is difficult to define IK because it varies along with the indigenous people of the world (Stephen, 2008). Common features have been identified, to create a working definition, such as this one provided by UNESCO:

Indigenous knowledge refers to a complete body of knowledge, know how and practices maintained and developed by people, generally in rural areas, who have extended histories of interaction with the natural environment. These sets of understandings, interpretations and meanings are part of a cultural complex that encompasses language, naming and classification systems, practices for using resources, ritual, and spirituality and worldview. It provides the basis for local level decision-making about many fundamental aspects of day-to- day life.

Indigenous communities preserve and transmit knowledge using techniques like oral storytelling and experiential instruction. Battiste and Hendersen (2004) state that IK systems can only be understood through the methods of a particular community, such as apprenticeships, ceremonies, and practice, and in the environment in which the system originates. Stevens (2008) asserts that the channels for communicating IK have become inaccessible to the indigenous people themselves, especially young people, because of the modern dependence on the written word and loss of facility with indigenous languages.

Indigenous communities face a threat to the survival of their languages and cultures. Stevens (2008) states that, while libraries have not traditionally focused on these areas, they can help indigenous communities manage and preserve IK, by providing resources and expertise in collection, organisation, storage, and retrieval. IK differs greatly from western knowledge, and must be managed in ways that may challenge conventional methods. Okore, et al., (2009) observes that libraries have made progress in the preservation of local culture in paper and digital format, and have promoted the exchange of information. According to IFLA (2008), libraries can help in:

- Collecting, preserving, and disseminating IK
- Publicizing the value, contribution, and importance of IK to both non-indigenous and indigenous people
- Involving elders and communities in the production of IK
- Encouraging the recognition of intellectual property laws to ensure the proper protection and use of IK

## Access to Indigenous Knowledge

Okore, et al., (2009) state that:

Though there is so much indigenous knowledge in different indigenous communities of the developing world, the availability of such knowledge does not mean its accessibility or use. Libraries can promote access to indigenous knowledge by creating an environment which permits face-to-face forums and network formation to discuss and debate on issues that might be useful to members of the communities. For example, libraries can organize talk shows involving traditional rulers, elderly people and professionals to gather and record information on various local vocations from different subject areas ranging from agriculture, ecosystem, medical care, and conflict resolution.

They go on to point out that, “libraries can work in partnership with library schools to create indigenous knowledge collections, which can be repackaged and made accessible.” Stevens (2008) believes that libraries and information professionals should partner with indigenous communities. Ngulube (2002), however, observes that libraries have not been particularly active in managing IK. Nakata and Langton (2005) suggest that libraries and archives must look at the broad issues involved in the preservation of IK. They assert that libraries must consider IK not simply part of a historical archive, but a contemporary body of relevant knowledge. There is therefore the need to provide ICTs such as computers, Internet, digital cameras, camcorders, and so on, to allow libraries to make IK accessible (Okore, et al., 2009).

## Managing IK

According to Anand (2009), the major challenge of IK management is the system of communication. IK is often communicated through family members from the older generation to the younger. As a result, it disappears or gets lost because of cultural homogenization and the death of indigenous people. Libraries may not have the time or resources to find IK in existing collections and to find people to provide information to give access to it (Nakata and Langton 2005).

Nakata and Langton note further that repatriation of IK materials may pose a challenge for librarians. Questions include, how are materials to be identified, copied, organized, stored, and retrieved to meet the needs of particular communities? Other questions include infrastructure, technology, and training.

Moreover, Okore, et al., (2009) identify the challenges of IK management to include:

- Intellectual property rights
- Labour requirements
- Time requirements
- Funding
- Reluctance of indigenous people to share their knowledge
- Competition with existing community structures for IK

In same vein, Adams (2007), emphasizes the fact that not all aspects of IK can be captured or recorded.

## Research Questions

The research questions posed in this paper are:

- What are the roles of IK in the Niger Delta?
- How effective is the management of IK in the Niger Delta?
- How do libraries preserve IK?
- How does the library make IK accessible?
- What are the challenges of managing IK?

### Methodology

This study is a survey that used a questionnaire to collect data. Unstructured interviews and observation were also used to gather additional data. The libraries investigated are Western Delta University Library, Oghara (5 respondents), Delta State Library Board, Asaba (40 respondents), Delta State University Library, Abraka (20 respondents), Delta State Polytechnic, Otefe (10 respondents), all in Delta State. Others are Benson Idahosa University Library, Benin City (11 respondents) and Light House Polytechnic, Evbobanosa (2 respondents), both in Edo State. Delta and Edo States are in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. A total of 88 questionnaires were administered, of which 82 were returned, which is a 93.19 percent return rate.

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using percentage and statistical charts.

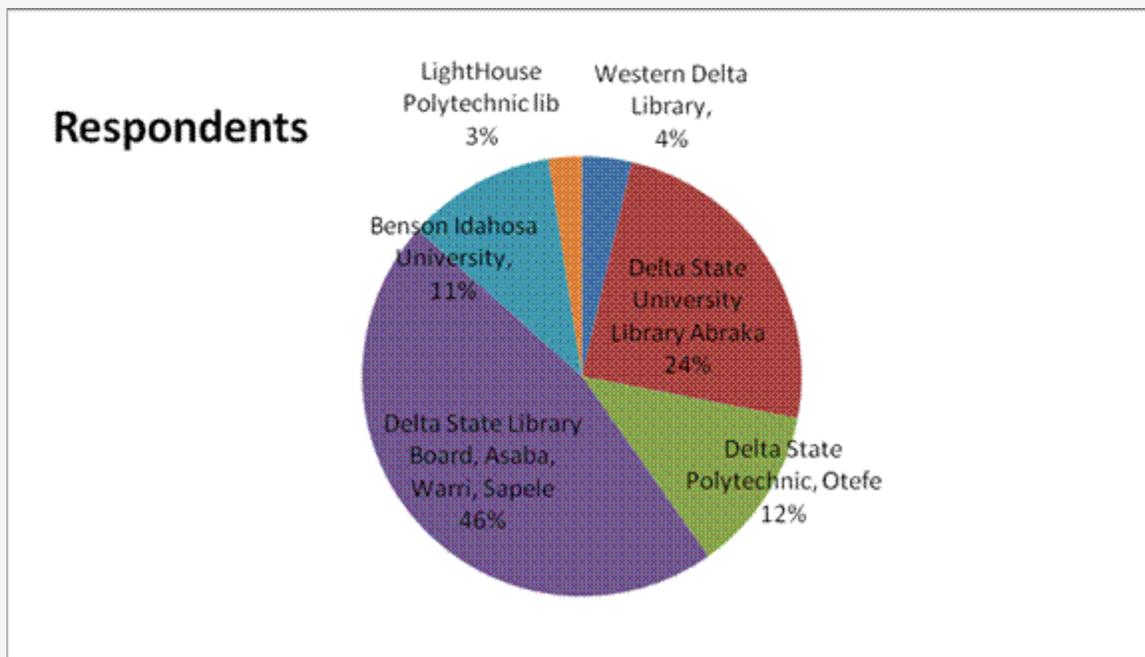


Chart 1: distribution of respondents by libraries.

Nearly half of respondents were from the Delta State Library Board, with about a quarter from the DELSU Library.

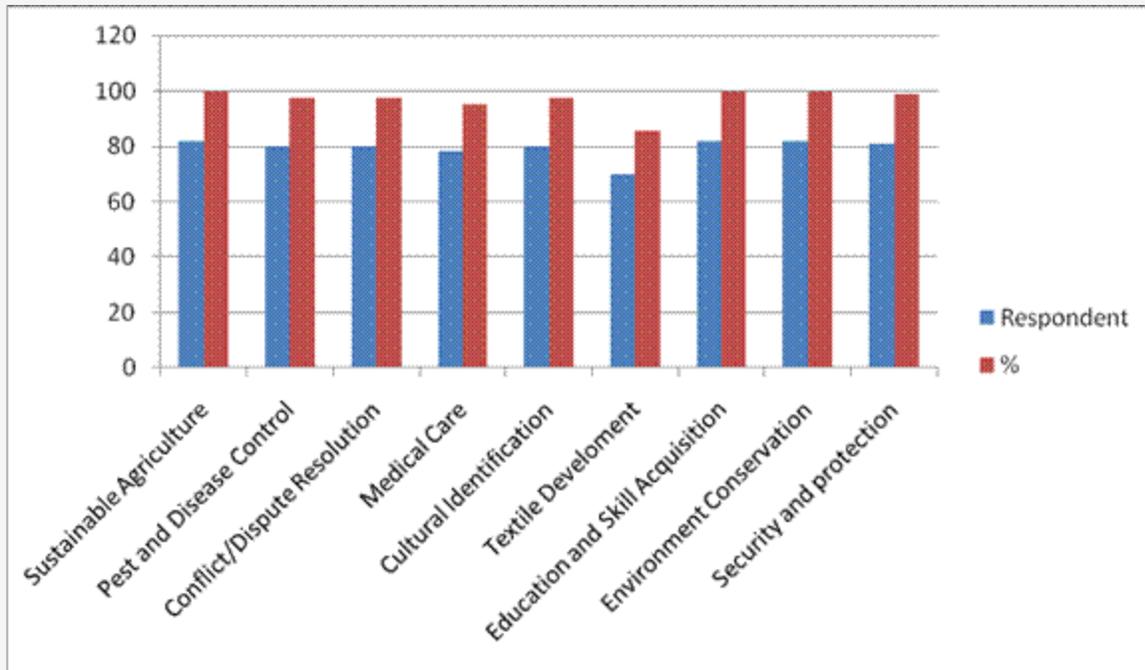


Chart 2: role of IK in Niger Delta

There is a high level of agreement among respondents about the role of IK.

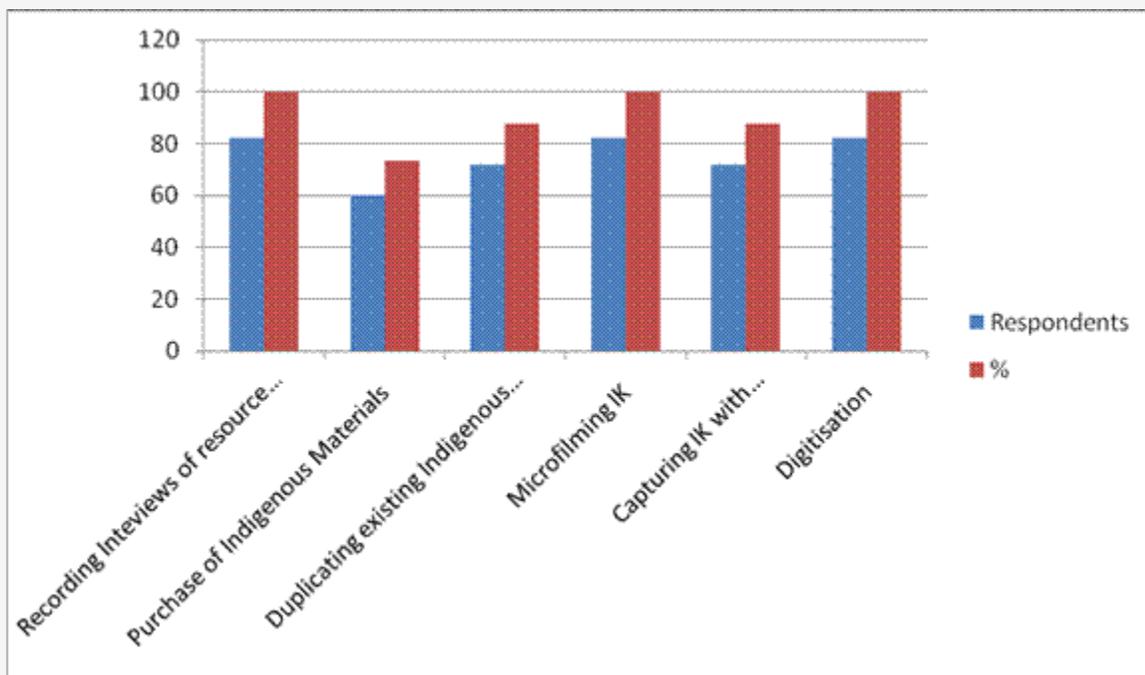


Chart 3: Techniques for preserving IK.

All the respondents said that to preserve IK, they record interviews of resource persons, and create microfilm records. Nearly all used cameras to capture indigenous information, and nearly three-quarters purchase indigenous materials in order to preserve them.

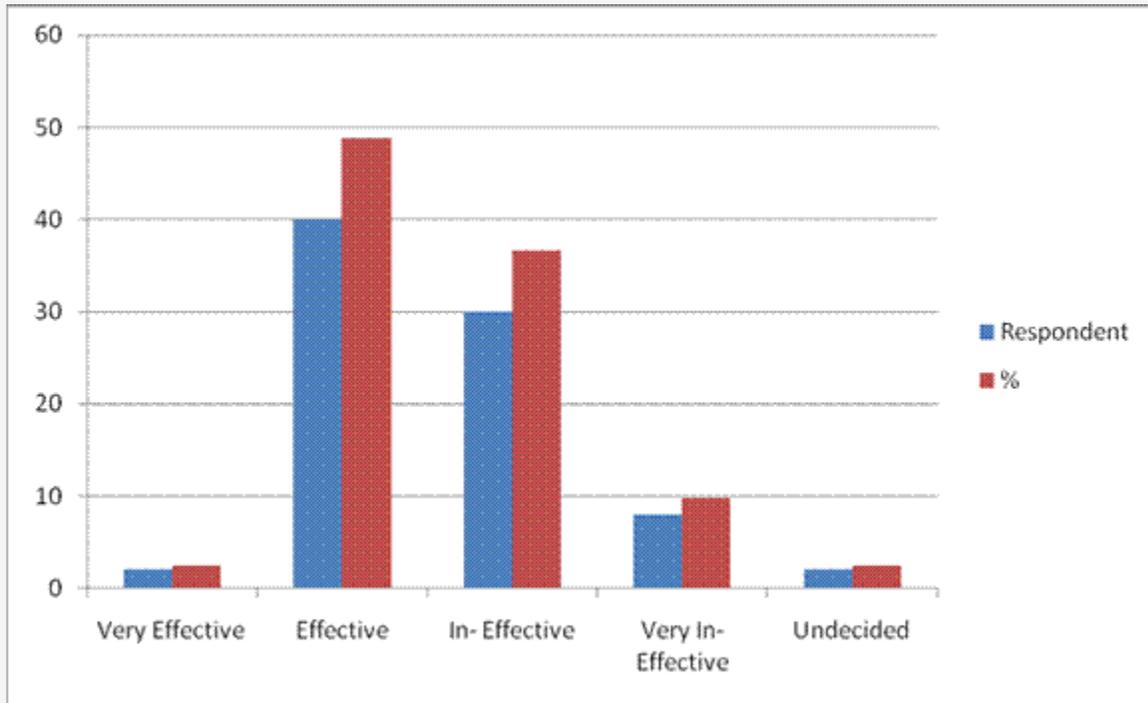


Chart 4: IK management effectiveness

Slightly fewer than half of respondents said that IK management is effective, and more than one-third said that it is ineffective.

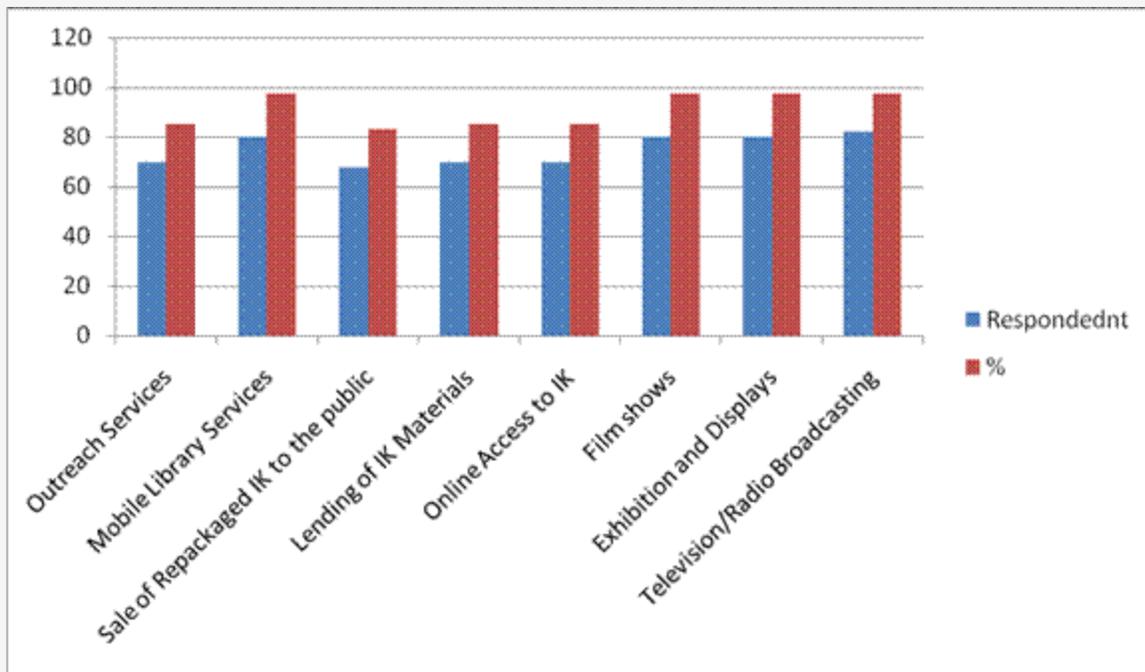


Chart 5: Methods for making IK accessible

All respondents said that television and radio broadcasting will make IK accessible to indigenous people, while nearly all also agreed that mobile library services, films, exhibitions, outreach services, lending of IK materials, online access to IK, and repackaging of IK by the library will facilitate access.

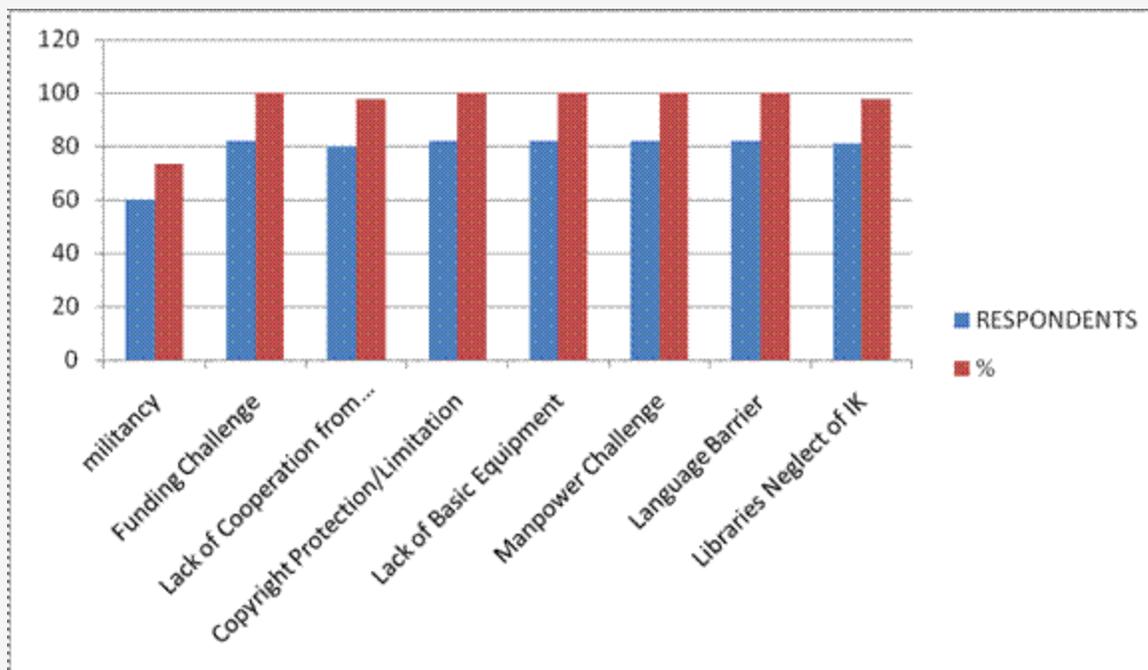


Chart 6: Challenges of IK management

All respondents identified the challenges of IK management to include lack of funding, copyright protection/limitation, lack of basic equipment, staffing challenges, and language barriers. A nearly equal number identified lack of cooperation by indigenous people and libraries neglect of IK, while nearly three-quarters identified identified militancy as a challenge.

## **Discussion**

This study found that IK enables indigenous communities to sustain agriculture, acquire education and vocational skills, and conserve their environment, as well as resolving conflicts, controlling pests, maintaining good health, and ensuring the security of lives and property. This study agrees with the findings of Warren (1991) who reported that IK contributes significantly to crop production of poor farmers. It also discovered what Nakata and Langton (2005) reported: that IK promotes healthy agricultural practices and the development of plant and animal species. Little wonder that Camble and Aliyu (2008) stated that IK has played a vital role in agriculture, animal and human health, natural resources management, education and other activities.

Even UNESCO (n.d.) has declared that IK produces the basis for local-level decision-making about fundamental aspects of life including hunting, fishing, gathering, agriculture and husbandry, food production, water resource management, and adaptation to environment or social change.

It was also discovered that IK is not effectively managed in Niger Delta libraries. Ngulube (2002) states that libraries have not been particularly been active in managing IK. Nakata and Langton (2005) observe that the library and information profession has much learning to do, to meet the information needs of indigenous people and appropriately manage IK in library and information centres.

Techniques for preserving IK include digitization, tape recording, microfilming, and purchase of indigenous materials. Okore, et al., (2009) found preservation methods to include documentation, digitization, videorecording, and providing Internet access.

The study identified ways of making IK accessible, including television/radio broadcasting, exhibits and displays, film, mobile library services, lending of relevant indigenous materials, and online access. Libraries can use the Internet to provide access to a wide range of IK (Okore, et al., 2009). Stevens (2008) adds that libraries should collaborate with indigenous communities to acquire, store, and make IK accessible.

The study discovered the challenges of IK management, including inadequate funding, copyright restriction, lack of basic equipment, neglect of IK, militancy, language barriers, and lack of staff. This finding confirms the statements of Okore, et al., (2009) and Adam's (2007) observation that not all aspects of IK are capturable.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

IK helps the Niger Delta indigenous communities produce food, acquire education and vocational skills, and conserve their natural environments, among many other things. The management of IK in Niger Delta libraries is ineffective. IK is not taken seriously in Niger Delta libraries.

Libraries and librarians should prioritize the management of IK. IK management equipment and tools should be provided in libraries. Libraries should collaborate with indigenous people to acquire, store, and make IK accessible. Efforts should be made to collect and package IK and make it available on the Internet. Efforts should also be made to persuade traditional institutions and resource persons in indigenous communities to share IK with libraries for proper preservation and accessibility. Government and corporate organizations should collaborate with libraries by providing fund for of preservation and

accessibility of IK. Copyright issues should be properly sorted out before embarking on any collaboration agreement.

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